

IMMIGRANTS

Revitalizing Small-Town America



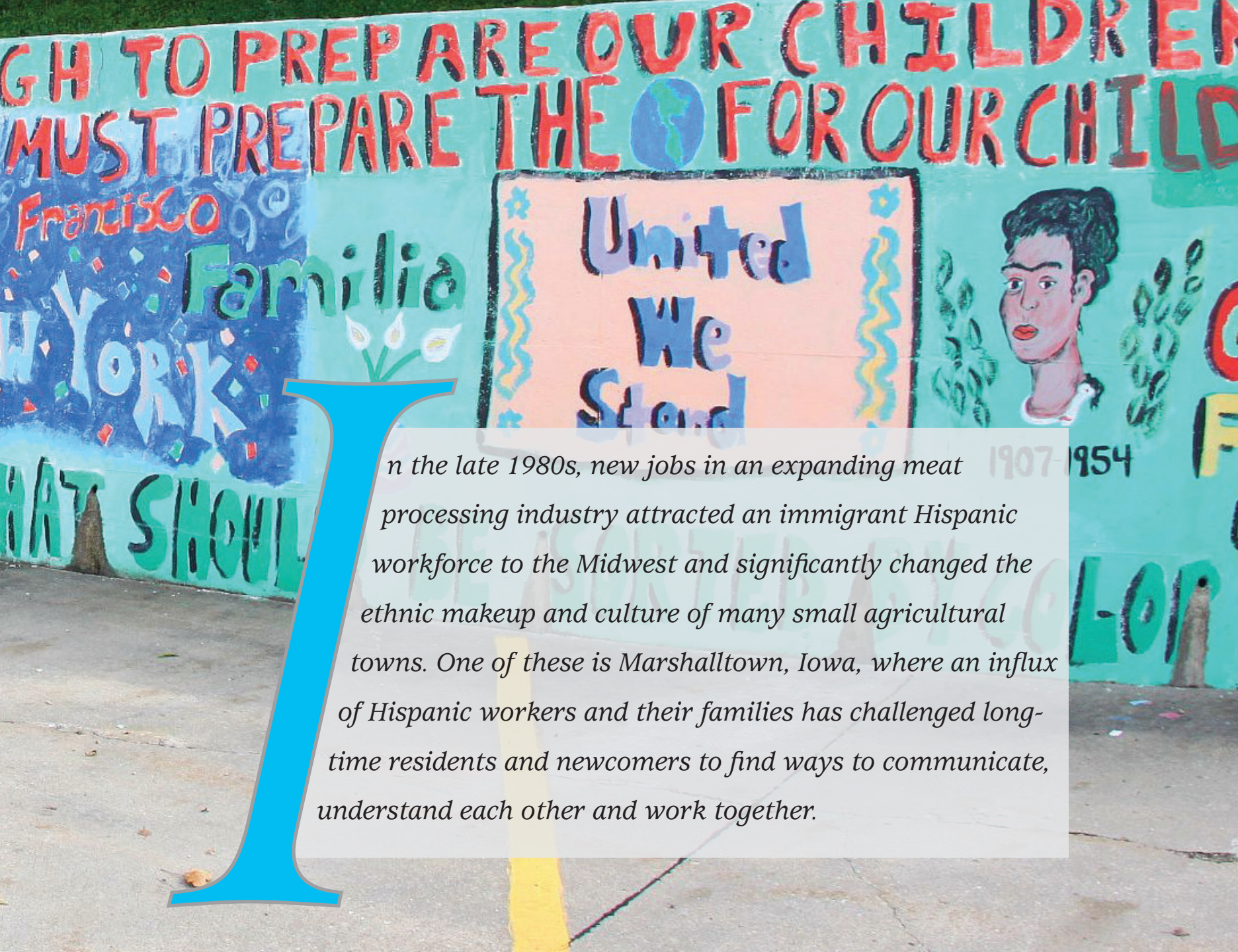


REVITALIZING A MIDWESTERN CITY

Immigrants in Marshalltown

Recent immigrants to the U.S. heartland are revitalizing
Midwestern communities, sparking new economic
growth and greater cross-cultural understanding.

By Anne C. Woodrick



In the late 1980s, new jobs in an expanding meat processing industry attracted an immigrant Hispanic workforce to the Midwest and significantly changed the ethnic makeup and culture of many small agricultural towns. One of these is Marshalltown, Iowa, where an influx of Hispanic workers and their families has challenged long-time residents and newcomers to find ways to communicate, understand each other and work together.

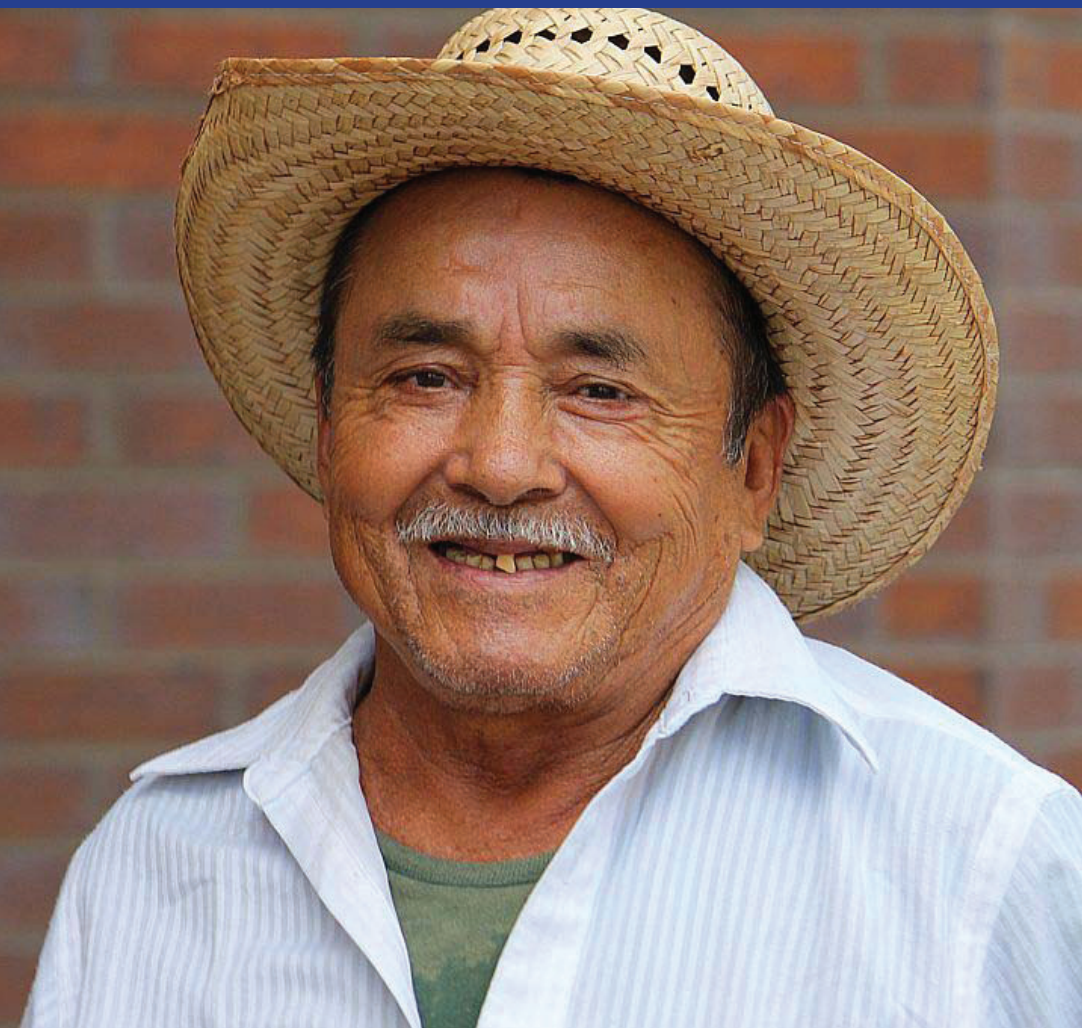


PHOTO CREDIT: TAMMY R. LAWSON

Since the late 1980s, Marshalltown, an agricultural city located in central Iowa, has been transformed by an influx of Hispanic workers and their families. Today Hispanics constitute about 20 percent of Marshalltown's total population of 25,000. The Hispanic community has established itself in Marshalltown, raising families, starting businesses, and bringing diversity to this small city and its region.



VOICES OF MARSHALLTOWN:
LISTEN TO MARSHALLTOWN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE PRESIDENT KEN ANDERSON
<http://go.usa.gov/C9i>

Marshalltown, which had a population of 25,814 in 2009, is an agricultural and industrial town located in central Iowa. Like the rest of Iowa, Marshalltown historically has had a very homogeneous population. The town was settled in 1853 by primarily German, Irish and Norwegian settlers. Twenty years ago, only 5 percent of the population was non-European; the percentage included refugee families from Southeast Asia, Native Americans and African Americans. None of these groups ever developed a significant population base in Marshalltown. However, the 292 Hispanic residents, or 0.76 percent of the population living in Marshall County in 1990, were the foundation for a rapid ethnic diversification of the town and its environs.

The expansion of the Swift and Company meatpacking facility in Marshalltown in the late 1980s attracted some Hispanics who left their homes in California's central valley seeking new labor opportunities, a more tranquil lifestyle and a lower cost of living. Within a decade, more than 3,700 Hispanics had settled in Marshall County (9.6 percent of the total population), and by 2009 just over 6,100 Hispanics resided there (15.8 percent of the total population). One significant reason for the rapid increase was the networking that developed between the Swift plant and the residents of Villachuato, Michoacán, Mexico. By 1998, just under a third of the entire production line at Swift's were Villachuatans. Although the resident Hispanic population represents many Latin American countries and most Mexican states, a high percentage of the immigrants are from Michoacán, Jalisco and Guanajuato, Mexico.



PHOTO CREDIT: TAMMY R. LAWSON

Today Hispanic pupils make up approximately 40 percent of students in the Marshalltown Community School District, outpacing the statewide average of 6.5 percent. Like many small Midwestern cities, Marshalltown had a declining population before the local meatpacking facility began to attract immigrants in the late 1980s.



VOICES OF MARSHALLTOWN:
LISTEN TO MARSHALLTOWN RESIDENT YOLANDA LEON
<http://go.usa.gov/C90>

Today the Hispanic presence in Marshalltown is obvious. More homes are painted pastel colors, and statues of the Virgin of Guadalupe grace front lawns. Spanish signs are everywhere. One elementary school has a bilingual curriculum. Several churches, Catholic and Protestant, offer religious and nonreligious programming for Hispanics. Large and well-attended Mexican fiestas for weddings and quinceaños celebrations occur frequently. Mexican shops of all varieties are located in the town's center. New Hispanic-owned businesses have been established. Every social institution in town has been influenced by the newcomers.

TENSIONS BETWEEN NATIVES AND NEWCOMERS

Tensions between newcomers and long-time residents developed around four broad issues. **Logistical issues** centered on how local institutions and businesses could accommodate and serve the fast-growing newcomer population. Initial outreach and service encountered another major issue — the **socio-cultural gap** between the townspeople and Hispanic newcomers. Communication was difficult if not impossible. Language and cultural barriers could not be solved just by hiring translators, who initially were not even always fluent in both languages. In many cases, townspeople had unrealistic expectations, thinking that the newcomers would learn English overnight and behave like Iowa natives immediately. Hispanic immigrants tried to negotiate their new environment, but they became discouraged when trying to communicate,



PHOTO CREDIT: TAMMY R. LAWSON

The survival of Marshalltown's downtown district comes in large part thanks to immigrant-owned and operated businesses.



VOICES OF MARSHALLTOWN:
LISTEN TO EDUCATOR JENNIFER WILSON
<http://go.usa.gov/C9c>

and misunderstandings were common. Even when Hispanics shared a common social practice, like attending church, different cultural behaviors created problems.

Legal/political issues also created tensions. The most significant issue has been the undocumented status of many Hispanics. Some Anglo Marshalltown residents lumped Hispanic newcomers into one category: Mexican illegal alien, with “illegal” taken to mean criminal.

A fourth source of tension has been **discrimination**, based largely on negative stereotypes. In Marshalltown, tensions were exacerbated by the rapid increase in the immigrant population and through observations and printed materials that easily misconstrued or misinformed. The majority of comments about Hispanics published anonymously in the local newspaper's “say it as it is” column conveyed that Hispanics were ruining Marshalltown.

KEYS TO ACCOMMODATION

In 1989, Hispanic immigrants in Marshalltown were isolated and ignored newcomers. This slowly began to change. Initially, one person reached out to the Hispanic newcomers. He could not solve all the problems, but he did make a difference and set into motion programs that later became significant in transforming Marshalltown into a culturally diverse and successful community. In December 1990, a Hispanic community identity developed through the organization of a religious congregation by a Lutheran priest, John Allen, who encouraged dialogue between



PHOTO CREDIT: TAMMY R. LAWSON

One of several thriving Hispanic-owned businesses in Marshalltown, Iowa, the Villachuato Authentic Mexican Restaurant contributes to the town's economic vitality. "We have a stronger community because of the immigrant population," says Mayor Gene Beach.



VOICES OF MARSHALLTOWN:
LISTEN TO MARSHALLTOWN MAYOR GENE BEACH
<http://go.usa.gov/C9x>

him and the newcomers. Allen educated townspeople about the immigrants and advocated for their needs. He organized a civic task force (later the diversity committee), composed of key town officials and leaders, to coordinate accommodation efforts. Ministry outreach programs provided English as a Second Language classes, created a food bank and provided housing needs. Allen clearly understood the need to integrate the new immigrants into the wider Marshalltown society.

Two years later, Allen, under heavy criticism from his parishioners for ministering to "Catholic" Hispanics in a Lutheran church, resigned from his position. At the same time the nearby Catholic church had hired Father Paul Ouderkirk to oversee a new Hispanic ministry. Allen and Ouderkirk became friends and wrote a special liturgy "to transition" the Hispanic congregation from the Lutheran church to the Catholic church. This move strengthened the Hispanic community identity. Lay Hispanic leadership opportunities expanded within the Catholic church. The Catholic Hispanic ministers acted as a protective shield for the immigrant community. They helped educate parishioners and community members to dispel stereotypical ideas and misinformation. They helped Hispanics with legal paperwork. The diversity committee continued addressing logistical issues. Hispanic were invited to join the diversity committee, but rarely attended. Then, in 1996, INS enforcement officials came to the meatpacking plant and arrested 99 Hispanic workers who did not have legal documentation to work in the United



“Some people accept you and some people don’t,” says real estate agent Martha Garcia, a Mexican-born immigrant who moved to Marshalltown in 1996. “They don’t know what to expect.”



**VOICES OF MARSHALLTOWN:
LISTEN TO REAL ESTATE AGENT MARTHA GARCIA**
<http://go.usa.gov/C9a>

PHOTO CREDIT: TAMMY R. LAWSON

States. The “illegal aliens” were deported, media coverage about illegal Mexicans increased, and the earlier efforts at integration were eroded.

Negative press about illegal Hispanic immigration brought up all the old feelings and negative stereotypes. One beneficial outcome of the raid was an open public forum sponsored by the diversity committee. Hispanics and townspeople met and discussed the raid and its consequences. The following year, the diversity committee advertised the annual 4th of July celebration as Heritage Day and recognized all the town’s ethnic groups. The practice continued in subsequent years.

In 1998 another change in the Catholic Hispanic ministry served as a catalyst for the Hispanic community. In church study groups, Hispanics talked about experiences with exploitation and discrimination. Sister Thein encouraged them to bring the issues forward to the city council. They did, and she interpreted for them. Hispanics then organized their first public protest on Palm Sunday. They emphasized how Hispanic values about family, work and religion were no different than Anglo values.

In 2001 several university professors organized the first of several learning trips, bringing key Marshalltown leaders to Villachuato, Mexico. There the leaders came to understand the historical and economic context of immigration and the day-to-day realities of families torn apart by migration. They returned home with radically changed perceptions and soon launched a number of innovative

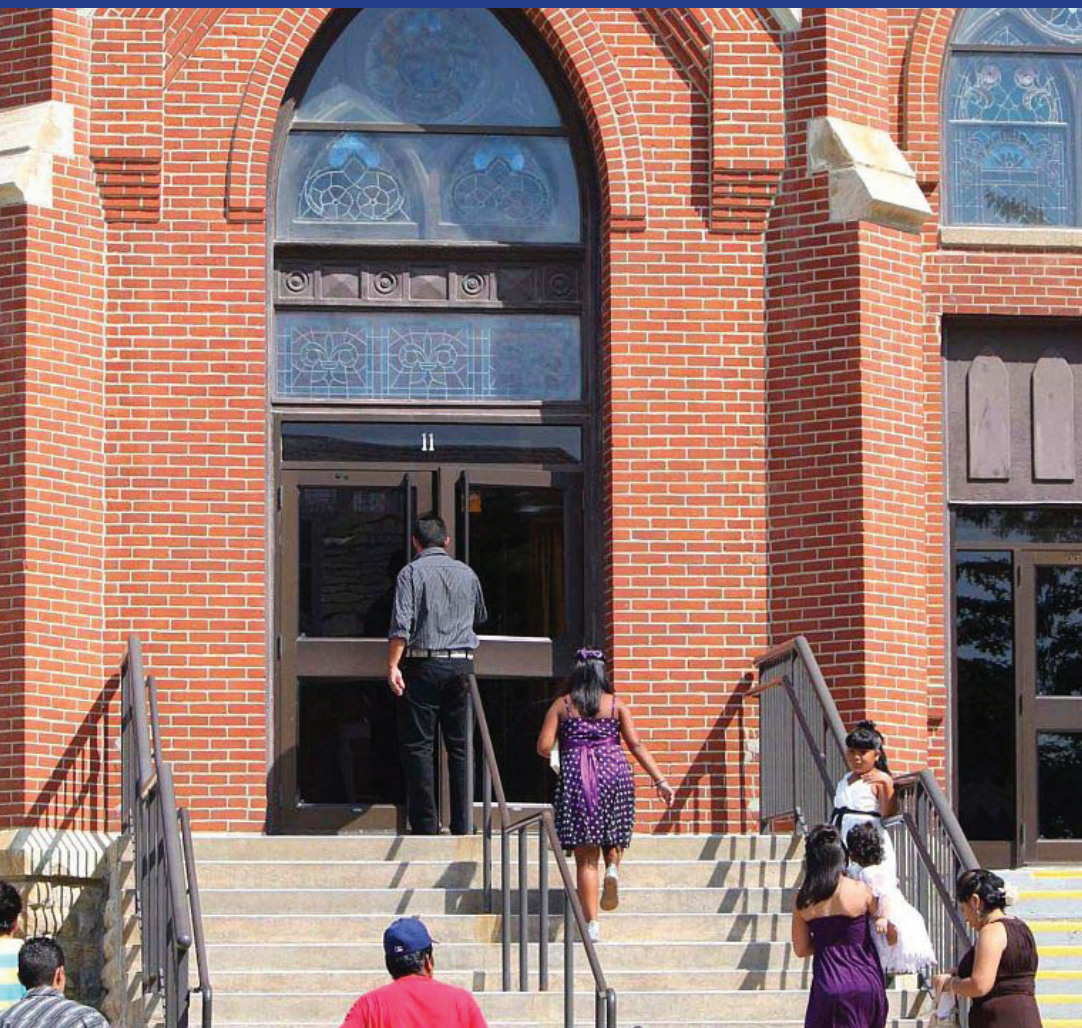


PHOTO CREDIT: TAMMY R. LAWSON

St. Mary's Catholic Church in Marshalltown offers Sunday mass in Spanish. Rev. Jim Miller says that more than 90 percent of baptisms at St. Mary's are for Hispanic families. Since the 1990s, religious leaders have played a key role in helping integrate new immigrants into Marshalltown. Religious leaders worked with town officials, service organizations and immigrants to establish Marshalltown's Diversity Committee in 1996. Martha Garcia served on Marshalltown's Diversity Committee.



VOICES OF MARSHALLTOWN:
LISTEN TO DIVERSITY COMMITTEE MEMBER MARTHA GARCIA
<http://go.usa.gov/C9C>

outreach programs, among them an elementary bilingual curriculum and a Spanish-language video explaining Marshalltown laws. City leaders also recognized the importance of Hispanics for local economic growth and development. These initiatives increased social engagement and understanding.

In 2004 the diversity committee disbanded because Hispanic leaders were becoming active participants in the Marshalltown community. Hispanic leaders, several of whom were among the first newcomers, identified issues that affected their well-being and sought solutions. Hispanic youth have learned from their parents' experiences, and actively engage in public forums and advocate for their rights.

The tensions in Marshalltown have not completely disappeared. Progress has been followed by setbacks. Tensions between established residents and newcomers ebb and flow, and never completely disappear. But Marshalltown has made significant progress in integrating Hispanic immigrants through the efforts of empathic, dedicated and visionary people who promoted but did not mandate communication and engagement between the newcomers and the townspeople. Innovative approaches to old problems stimulated new ideas and directions. Anglo and Hispanic leaders encouraged routine opportunities for open dialogue, experiential learning for city leaders, and civic responsibility. As a result, Marshalltown exemplifies how recent immigrants can become less invisible and isolated and more integrated in civil discourse and action.



PHOTO CREDIT: TAMMY R. LAWSON

Encouraging children to learn about all cultures, the Marshalltown Public Library hosts an annual Día de los Niños/Día de los Libros Fiesta, a youth day celebration at which volunteers help Spanish-speaking families sign up for library cards. Jennifer Wilson, director of the Iowa Valley Education and Training Center, says, "The local library has been a huge welcomer to new lowans and new immigrants."



VOICES OF MARSHALLTOWN:
LISTEN TO EDUCATOR JENNIFER WILSON
<http://go.usa.gov/C91>

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Interview with Jennifer Wilson,
Director of the Iowa Valley
Education and Training Center



SEPTEMBER 2010

QUESTION 1

STAFF: How do you feel Marshalltown's immigrants have impacted the town?

WILSON: You know, we have seen a great, great community due to the immigrant population. What they have brought to Marshalltown is just – it's been wonderful. What I have seen personally is more of the family community atmosphere. They know their neighbors. They know each other. They support one another. And they have really brought a community together.

I think another really positive thing that has come (sic) is the interaction that the children have within the school system, and just the other languages that are being presented within there – within the school. I just think that having the immigrants come to Marshalltown has enforced the need to bond together as a community.

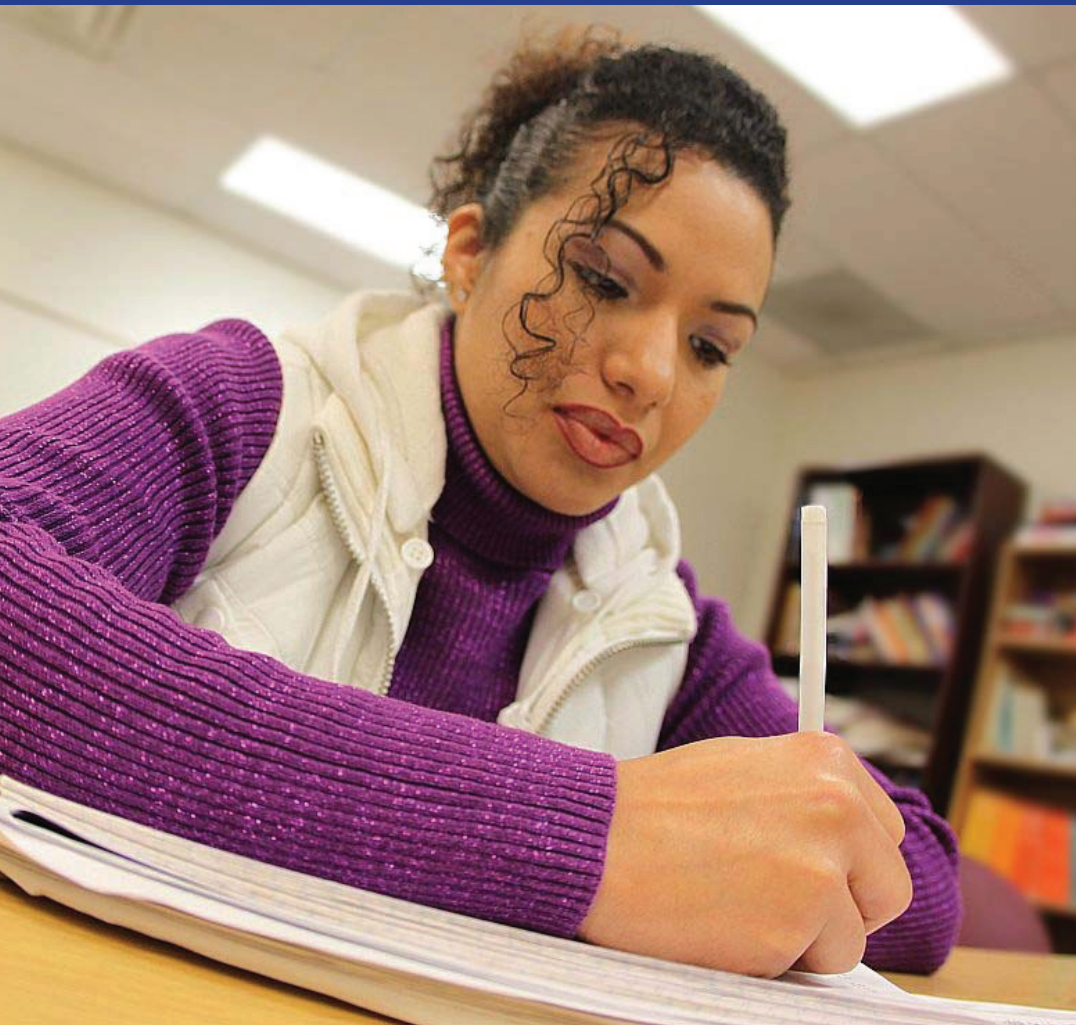
<http://go.usa.gov/C94>

QUESTION 2

NARRATOR: How would you characterize the goals of Marshalltown's Hispanic immigrants?

WILSON: One is the drive to be educated. They have a strong drive to know English, know it to the best of their ability, and then go on, like, out to college, get job training, to better themselves educationally.

<http://go.usa.gov/C92>



Yolanda Leon, 32, moved from Mexico to Marshalltown in 1996. A married mother of three girls, Leon recently received her GED and is now majoring in English at the Iowa Valley Education and Training Center. “I hope to one day teach elementary students,” she says, “I enjoy going to school and have made many, many friends.”

PHOTO CREDIT: TAMMY R. LAWSON



VOICES OF MARSHALLTOWN:
LISTEN TO STUDENTS YOLANDA LEON AND MARA GUADALUPE PEREZ
<http://go.usa.gov/C9r>

QUESTION 3



STAFF: In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges that immigrants face when they first arrive here and how do they meet them?

WILSON: There's at least two or three. First one is the stereotype that “they take all our jobs,” and that white folks are in poverty, or do not have jobs, or the employment rate is so high because the immigrants are taking all our jobs, which is not true. (Chuckles.)

The other thing is that “they don't want to learn the language,” which is also not true. They do want to learn English. They want to learn English as bad as we want them to learn English. But folks don't understand how long it takes to learn a different language. And so those are some of the major stereotypes that folks face. But we need to break down those stereotypes that they don't want those things. And part of that is just communication.

<http://go.usa.gov/C9T>

QUESTION 4



STAFF: How do you view Marshalltown's overall experience with immigration?

WILSON: You know, I view it as a positive one. Marshalltown has not declined in growth. We have not grown, but we have not declined. We are staying pretty consistent with the number of folks living in Marshalltown, and that is because of the immigrant population. That is incredibly important right now for funding, for resources, for our school systems, for our businesses. You know, a lot of towns that are about our size, what they have seen is a decline in the number of folks – or, an increase, I guess, in the number of folks moving out of town, and moving even out of state. And we are not seeing that. I really see that it has been a very positive thing.

<http://go.usa.gov/C9b>



PHOTO CREDIT: TAMMY R. LAWSON

In 1998, Marshalltown's Diversity Committee sponsored a Marshalltown Heritage Day festival on July 4th to celebrate the town's diversity with music, food and a ceremony recognizing those who had recently become U.S. citizens. The festival has become an annual event at which both Hispanic and Anglo families participate.



VOICES OF MARSHALLTOWN:
LISTEN TO EDUCATOR JENNIFER WILSON
<http://go.usa.gov/C9Y>

REVITALIZING A MIDWESTERN CITY Immigrants in Marshalltown

Dr. Anne C. Woodrick is a professor of anthropology at the University of Northern Iowa. She received her bachelor's in anthropology from the University of Michigan and her doctorate from the University of California, San Diego. Her research interests include the role of religion in community development and mobilization among Latino immigrants in the U.S. Midwest and the religiosity of rural Mexican women.

AUDIO TRANSCRIPTS

Transcript:1

STAFF: Marshalltown Chamber of Commerce President Ken Anderson describes the opportunities immigrants have brought to Marshalltown.

ANDERSON: I think the opportunity to understand different cultures, and the opportunity to learn different languages and make it more integrated into their community is a real opportunity.

STAFF: Educator Jennifer Wilson describes the sense of community immigrants bring to Marshalltown.

WILSON: We have seen a great, great community due to the immigrant population. What they have brought to Marshalltown is just – it's been wonderful. What I have seen personally is more of the family community atmosphere. They know their neighbors. They know each other. They support one another. And they have really brought a community together.

Transcript:2

LEON: In my opinion, this is the right place for my children to grow up, because it's a safe place for them.



PHOTO CREDIT: TAMMY R. LAWSON

A decade ago, students at the local community college painted a mural downtown along Center Street that celebrates Marshalltown's diversity. Marshalltown has been successful in integrating Hispanic immigrants thanks to the efforts of empathic, dedicated, visionary people who promoted but did not mandate communication and engagement between the newcomers and the townspeople. In 2004, Marshalltown's Diversity Committee disbanded because Hispanic leaders were becoming active participants in the Marshalltown community.



VOICES OF MARSHALLTOWN:
LISTEN TO EDUCATOR JENNIFER WILSON
<http://go.usa.gov/C9g>

Transcript:3

WILSON: There has become an increase to business owners who are immigrants, which actually has allowed our downtown district to continue to blossom. A lot of small communities, their downtown districts are just kind of dying up, and ours aren't – ours is not. We have a great mix downtown of immigrant and non-immigrant business owners, which has allowed us to have flexibility in just a wide range of where we want to shop, where we want to eat.

Transcript:4

BEACH: But I do think we have a strong community. I think we work very hard, both of these gentlemen worked very hard for several years to try to make it work. We continue to work, and I'll underscore that, what he said, we do not encourage, nor do we want illegal immigration. We do need a workforce. I think we also need to pay people well.

Transcript:5

GARCIA: And I remember everybody trying to be welcoming, but in the same way they are afraid and they don't know how to handle. They are not prepared in that time how to handle all that bunch of people coming with a different kind of culture, different type of a way to live.

Transcript:6

GARCIA: I remember when I started in the Diversity Committee, Floyd was there. And I never forgot, Floyd come in and told me, "Martha, if you have questions, or you need help, let me know how I can help. And that I – we appreciate it and we pass the voice, do you know the people and tell them, "Do you know? There's people in here who want to help you."

Transcript:7

WILSON: The local library has been a huge welcomer to new Iowans and new immigrants, and the school district. The school district has probably had the largest welcoming and open arms to new immigrants, because that's usually the first place that families go when they have children, is right straight to the school system. And they have done an excellent job.

Transcript:8

LEON: I feel like I'm part of the community, and I like this place.

PEREZ: I like it too, because especially that it's a small town, well for me that's better, and education is better, so I like this place.

Transcript:9

WILSON: We have seen a great, great community due to the immigrant population. What they have brought to Marshalltown is just – it's been wonderful. I guess the – what I have seen personally is more of the family community atmosphere. They know their neighbors. They know each other. They support one another. And they have really brought a community together. I think another really positive thing that has came (sic) is the interaction that the children have within the school system, and just the other languages that are being presented within there – within the school, I think, has been absolutely wonderful, and has given Marshalltown's school district different opportunities to give to all children, for example, the Dual Language Program. And I just think that having the immigrants come to Marshalltown has enforced the need to bond together as a community.

Transcript:10

WILSON: It has taken a long time. I think that's because, really, the Hispanics were the first that were coming in as immigrants 10 years ago. And being in the Midwest, white, Lutheran or Catholic community, they were going to – it was going to take a while. But I think what we have – we have really, really moved beyond those perceptions that it's a "we-them." It's an "us." It's an "us." And – I think it's only going to improve, especially with this next generation.

PHOTO CREDIT COVER, PAGE 1, PAGE 2: TAMMY R. LAWSON

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